

the US Census Bureau, North Carolina experienced a 15% increase in population from 1990 to 1999, and growth continues unabated (2000). The Natural Resources Conservation Service reports that the state ranked sixth in the country for total acres of land developed between 1992 and 1997 (1997). As land development and population growth rates have increased, fish and wildlife habitats have been altered, fragmented and destroyed.

Today, more than 40 federally-listed endangered or threatened animal species and more than 60 state endangered or threatened animal species occur in the state. There are 115 state Species of Special Concern, and many more are at risk of being added to that list. North Carolina contains eight of the top 21 most endangered ecosystems in the country, based on extent of decline, present area (rarity), imminence of threat, and number of federally-listed threatened and endangered species associated with each type, including Southern Appalachian spruce-fir forest, longleaf pine forest and savanna, ancient Eastern deciduous forest, and southern forested wetlands (Noss et al., 1995). The state also contains many watersheds critical to the preservation of aquatic biodiversity in the southeast (Master et al., 1998). Clearly, the need is great for proactive conservation planning to address these concerns, in particular, and the full array of fish and wildlife species and habitat concerns in general.

Value and Goals

North Carolina's Wildlife Action Plan (hereafter Plan) is a guide to the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (hereafter Commission) and to our partners in conservation for sound management of North Carolina's fish and wildlife resources into the future. Unlike many planning documents in the past, this Plan provides critical direction and serves as a blueprint for fish and wildlife conservation activities in the state. Within, we have identified significant wildlife resource and critical habitats across the state, as well as priorities for conserving those resources. We have addressed local, regional, and state-wide concerns across key terrestrial and aquatic habitats, using the best information currently available. In addition, we have identified critical knowledge gaps and future data needs. We have outlined a methodology for prioritizing activities that allows for allocation and reallocation of available manpower, funds, and material resources to meet changing conservation needs. And we have established a framework to measure the effectiveness of proposed strategies and monitor the results. Our Plan not only fulfills the requirements set forth by Congress; it also serves as a practical and essential resource for future fish and wildlife conservation planning in North Carolina.

The goals of our Plan are to:

- Improve our understanding of the species diversity in our state and enhance our ability to make conservation or management decisions for all species.
- Conserve and enhance habitats and the communities they support.
- Foster partnerships and cooperative efforts among natural resource agencies, organizations, academia and private industry.
- Support educational efforts to improve understanding of our wildlife resources among the general public and conservation stakeholders.
- Support and improve existing regulations and programs aimed at conserving habitats and communities.

The implementation of activities set forth in the Plan will result in maintaining our diverse fish and wildlife resources well into the future. Not only will North Carolina agencies and organizations dedicated to natural resource management and conservation benefit from the planning resource, but the citizens of the state will also benefit by the efforts put forth to maintain an environment favorable to wildlife. The continued availability of natural lands and wildlife populations will allow those engaged in wildlife-oriented recreation, be it consumptive or non-consumptive, to continue to enjoy their pursuits and will enhance those opportunities. More importantly, intact habitats and functioning ecosystems play a critical role in supporting all life on this planet, including our own.